

PENNY SAVER NEWS

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Have you noticed some big, brown dry pods in the produce section recently?

They look like overgrown flat green beans that have gotten way too ripe and turned brown. Some are losing their brittle outer skins, leaving just a sticky brown goo inside. It might not look very appetizing, but take a sip of tamarind ade and you will change your mind! What are these things? They are an ingredient in a very common sauce on many tables. Can you guess what it is before the end of the story?

Tamarinds, or as some people call them, tamarindos, are a tropical legume pod, rather like a super-overgrown lima bean pod. They grow on large trees that may live 200 years. When the pods are ripe the outside skin gets hard, brown and crisp. You can pick or crack a lot of it off. If you don't want to wait the green, immature pods can be eaten too. But it's the pasty pulp that surrounds the ripe seeds inside that is so interesting.

The pulp is sweet and tart at the same time. It's like a combination of apricots, lemons and dates. Depending on the growing season and where it grew, some tamarinds are much sweeter, other more acidic. In some parts of the world they are used as a laxative, so if you're not used to them start out slowly.

Even though the pulp is so sweet, it has a lot of fiber, so there are not a lot of calories. Each long brown pod only has about 5 calories and 1 g of carbohydrate. They don't have much in the way of vitamins, but are rich in several minerals including

magnesium. They have twice as much potassium as sodium, which is a good balance for your blood pressure.

In the Orient the green pods are grated and eaten like a salad with hot peppers and salt. In the Caribbean often the ripe pods are cooked with water to extract the sweet juices. This syrup is then used to make a very refreshing drink. Or the pulp is mixed with sugar, rolled in balls and eaten as homemade candy.

To prepare, start with about half a pound of tamarinds. Crack open the shells and separate it from the sticky pulp. If there are long strings, peel them off too. Cut or squeeze the pulp away from the seeds. Put the pulp in a pan or dish and cover with 3 cups of very hot water. Let it soak overnight, or at least several hours. Use a slotted spoon to scoop out any seeds or strings. The water and pulp is now tamarind concentrate. If you strain out all the pulp, the pulp is called paste or extract. Drink the juice if you just want to save the extract.

To make a delicious drink, just add 3 cups of water to a cup of concentrate. Add enough honey, sugar or low calorie sweetener to suit your taste. Pour over glasses of ice cubes. For a special touch, add sprigs of fresh mint, then start sipping.

If you want to really chill, put a dish of your drink in the freezer. When it starts getting slushy, take it out and stir it with a fork. Stick it back in the freezer and let it freeze solid. Scrape it out like an slushee and eat like ice cream. It's a wonderful dessert on a hot summer day!

If you want to stock up now, while the pods are available in the markets, go ahead. The brown pods, sealed in a plastic bag with the air squeezed out, will keep for several weeks. If you need to keep them longer than that, remove the dry shells and

squeeze out the seeds. The pulp will keep for about 6 months in the refrigerator, or up to a year in the freezer. Then you can make tamarind ade any time of the year.

Here's another tropical treat to try with tamarind extract. It's a delicious variation on standard rice pudding. Oh, and do you know what common tabletop sauce uses tamarind pulp? Worcestershire sauce!

Tamarind Rice Pudding

2 ½ cups cooked rice

1 cup low fat milk

3 Tbsp tamarind extract

½ tsp grated fresh ginger root

1 egg, or equivalent egg substitute

1 orange

Preheat oven to 350° F. Beat egg or egg substitute slightly. Peel orange, remove seeds and chop sections. Combine orange and all other ingredients in greased baking dish. Bake 40 minutes. Serve warm or cold. Serves 4 - 6.

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